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ABSTRACT

The distinctive focus of interpretive research on the meaning of curriculum is described, and the reconceptualization of the practice that interpretive studies provide is illustrated. The illustration includes the use of an interpretive lens to assess curriculum differentiation in lower-track high school classes. The interpretivist's interest in meaning provokes inquiry in three general domains: (1) the perspectives of school participants; (2) the processes in which meaning is constructed; and (3) the contexts in which meaning is shaped. From the interpretivist's perspective, curriculum differentiation is a sociocultural, political process in which teachers' and students' definitions of their roles and of knowledge interact in particular institutional settings. In the process, track placement, roles, interactional prerogatives, status, and knowledge are differentially allocated within a school and between schools. Application of the interpretive approach to a 2,000-student midwestern United States comprehensive high school provides insights into students' and teachers' perspective of the lower-track curriculum and patterns of resolving classroom conflicts. Results suggest that differentiation in public high schools occurs, in degree and process, much like differentiation in American society as a whole. The study also demonstrates that as important as the question of whether students and teachers come to school with different views of important knowledge is the question of why and how the differences are made important within the school. Thirteen notes and 87 references are appended. (TJH)

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INTERPRETING CURRICULUM DIFFERENTIATION

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 6, 1988.

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INTERPRETING CURRICULUM DIFFERENTIATION

Interpretive studies of schooling significantly sharpen understanding of the school's differentiating, or sorting and selecting, function. In part, they clarify persistent contradictions in traditional studies of curriculum differentiation and tracking by looking inside the black box of schools and classrooms to describe the processes and contexts in which curriculum differentiation produces its intended--and unintended--effects. For example, a simple but fundamental clarification of persistent discrepancies in survey data regarding students' track placement documents that students are unable to provide accurate survey responses because they do not know their track placement (Rosenbaum, 1976), are misinformed about it (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963), or are in more than one track (Valli, 1986). Less simply, interpretive studies elaborate issues originating in traditional research. Spindler (1974) and Wilcox (1982) explore the sources and mechanisms of teachers' expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968); Rosenbaum (1976) explains the independent effect of track placement (Goldberg, Passow, & Justman, 1966) on IQ; and Metz (1978), Swidler (1979), and Popkewitz, Tabachnick, & Wehlage (1982) show how differentiation is accomplished in the complex <u>interaction</u> of differences between and within schools (Coleman, 1966; Jencks & Brown, 1975).

However, interpretive research contributes much more than the clarification or fleshing out of experimental and survey research. It provides a fundamentally different way of thinking about differentiation in schools and its relationship to social differentiation. In this essay, I describe the distinctive focus of interpretive research on the meaning of curriculum differentiation, the reconceptualization of the practice that interpretive studies provide, and an example of what one sees in lower-track high school classes when using an interpretive lens.

I. EXPLICATING MEANING: THE INTERPRETIVE TASK

Interpretive studies ask what people in differentiated schoolrooms do and what they know that makes their behavior sensible (Spindler & Spindler, 1987), with the goal of explicating the meaning of curriculum differentiation. A good explication makes the provision of different courses of study to different groups of students appear strange rather than all-too-familiar and thereby brings differentiation to consciousness so that it can be scrutinized and understood, rather than overlooked as commonsensical (Spindler & Spindler, 1982). Like anthropological accounts that "reduce the puzzlement of . . . primitive facts in faraway places," interpretive studies of schooling at home "clarify what goes on in [schools]" to help us learn about ourselves (Geertz, 1973, p. 16). By contrast, traditional studies typically take curriculum differentiation at face value, measuring preconceived inputs and outputs to prove laws governing hetero- or homogeneous grouping's effects on academic achievement.

The interpretivist's interest in meaning provokes inquiry in three general domains: (1) the perspectives of school participants, (2) the processes in which meaning is constructed, and (3) the contexts in which meaning is shaped. With these domains in mind, one asks:

> (1) What are the perspectives of school participants regarding the roles of the teacher and student and the nature of the curriculum in differentiated classes?
>
> 2) Through what face-to-face processes do school participants make visible and negotiate their perspectives and, thereby construct meaning?
>
> 3) How is the meaning of curriculum differentiation that is constructed in a classroom linked to more stable precepts of institutional and social differentiation, such as academic ability, age, or social class?

These questions reflect assumptions about curricular and social differentiation that differ from those undergirding survey and experimental

research. Most crucial is the distinction made in interpretive research between facts of social and educational difference and their meaning. While differences abound--children, for example, differ in IQ, track placement, race, levels of self-esteem, and on countless other traits--the meaning of differences emerges only as people interpret and act on them. Thus, IQ, track level, race, self-esteem, and other traits are not automatically or inherently significant, but become important as people in classrooms make them important in particular ways. Hence, the specific ways people understand differences are not extraneous to or mere mediations between differential inputs and outcomes. They determine the inputs and outcomes and therefore are intrinsic to differentiation itself.

From this fundamental distinction flow several related assumptions. First, meaning, although it does not inhere automatically in social or educational phenomena, is also not simply idiosyncratic or random. It is a social construction, and in two senses of that word. First, a person's perspective is shaped by those of others with whom she/he interacts and, second, the perspectives of individuals are not created in situ but reflect broader historical and sociocultural understandings. Interpretive research attends to both aspects of socially constructed meaning, attempting to make explicit both the creative particularity of an event and its broader, more stable, representativeness.

For instance, the curriculum, although commonly posited as the work of an individual teacher which is transmitted to students, is shaped in significant ways by the responses, reactions and, on occasion, counter-definitions, offered by students. Thus, while a teacher may use a film with the best of pedagogical intentions--"to enhance students' knowledge of Greek mythology," as one teacher explained--students' knowing reactions to lugubrious, narrative intonements about "the Greek's knowledge of herbal lore" or nude statuary and

Zeus' assault on Leda shift the curriculum's significance. Simultaneously, although the students' catcalls reflect particular personalities and events, they also derive from implicit age-based norms of the more stable adolescent subculture. The teacher's lesson plan derives from personal interest and purposes but also from shared, tacit, informal norms of the faculty of the school regarding an appropriately classical curriculum. The regularity of adolescent joking or faculty cultures suggest causal "social structures." However, although such phenomena are taken for granted as the way things really are, they are themselves constructions of a particular time and culture (Mehan, 1978; Wehlage, 1981). Interpretive studies attempt to capture both the micro and macrolevel aspects of social reality and therefore run a middle course between radical individualism and radical social determinism (Erickson, 1986).

A second assumption of interpretive studies is that because phenomena acquire meaning as individuals actively interpret them, variation is the predominant feature of the social world (Spindler, 1982). Thus, an event like lower-track placement, while sharing surface similarities with lower-track placement elsewhere, is not fixed or uniform, since individuals differ in their perspectives and interpretations change with changes in time and place. Moreover, even very small variations between events deserve study. The marked similarities of lower and regular-track classes (Oakes, 1985) may confound statistical analyses seeking to measure robust differences between them. However, precisely the conjunction of gross similarities with subtle differences accounts for the stigma and persistence of some lower-track placements. Lower-track classes <u>caricature</u> regular-track classes (Page, 1987a) and, like other caricatures, derive their punch from both their similarity to and difference from that which they parody. As this example suggests, the assumptions of traditional statisticians that educational variables, like

lower-track placement, are discrete, uniform entities across time and place may mislead. Variables in the social world are rarely additive or linear in their effects but, instead, interact dynamically, with some setting limits on the effect of others.

Finally, interpretive studies, if wary of the purportedly universal laws of human behavior sought in traditional research, are not merely microscopic anecdotes or, as a colleague once accused, "creative writing." They are interpretations and have an interpretation's validity. The researcher systematically and analytically interprets for the reader the interpretations of classroom participants of events that happen. Thus, "ethnography is neither subjective nor objective . . . . but mediat[es] two worlds [those of the reader and the subjects] through a third [the researcher's] (Agar, 1986, p. 19). A good account refines or extends understanding of the events and their interpretations. It does not prove or predict the world, but helps one learn about it.

Interpretive studies begin with "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, citing Ryle, 1949). Because of the details, accounts provide the reader with vicarious experiences, so that events, such as dropping out of school, can be comprehended. Comprehension involves seeing situations that are usually stereotyped in a new, "humanized" (Agar, 1986, p. 44) light. Thus, dropping out of school may emerge as a sensible, if lamentable, choice, rather than an individual's failure. At the same time, interpretive studies provide the "intellectual instrumentalities" (Bellack, 1978, citing Dewey, 1916), or concepts, with which to identify and analyze analogous situations. Analogous cases do not so much accumulate, however, as they systematically probe and elaborate previously accepted interpretations so that events and concepts are more incisively understood. In short, interpretive studies capture the "profundities of the world"--stratification, knowledge, power, equal

educational opportunity--in "homely . . . ethnographic miniatures," conveying the mundane specificities with which such profundities are constructed. (Geertz, 1973, p. 21). They thereby provide the possibility for critical reflection about and conceptual clarification of curricular and social differentiation that precede informed educational policy, practice, and theory.

II. A DIFFERENT CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CURRICULUM DIFFERENTIATION

Interpretive studies have generated a reconceptualization of curriculum differentiation. It is a sociocultural, political process in which teachers' and students' definitions of their roles and of knowledge interact (Keddie, 1971) in particular institutional settings. In the process, not just track placement, but roles, interactional prerogatives, status, and knowledge are differentially allocated within a school and between schools.

By contrast, particularly in traditional studies grounded in educational psychology, curriculum differentiation is assumed to be fair and strictly academic. Accordingly, when schools track, they rather passively accommodate the talents and/or interests of individual students, testing progress with self-evident measures of achievement. While traditional sociological studies differ from the psychological by calling attention to the school's less than neutral role in providing for students' different assets and aspirations, they present as mechanistic a view of tracking. Somehow, the school order is determined by and replicates the social order. Therefore, traditional studies treat as self-evident or extraneous the explicit and implicit intentions and choices of teachers or students and the relationship between curricular and social differentiation.

Not surprisingly, given the reconceptualization of curriculum differentiation, interpretive studies not only clarify contradictions in positivistic studies but add to them. For example, traditional studies more

often suggest the limited effects of curriculum differentiation whereas ethnographic studies suggest its very powerful effects (Gamoran & Berends, 1987). There has also been a cross-fertilization between the two paradigms, with interpretive research specifying its grounds for knowing more rigorously (Agar, 1986), and traditional studies beginning to consider the effects of context (Rogoff, 1986) or the need to look at processes between input and output (as Gamoran does in the accompanying article). While the merger of the two paradigms beyond a sharing of techniques appears unlikely, (Smith & Heshusius, 1986; Jackson, 1986), given different theoretical stances toward the nature of the social world and valid research, their interplay--not a "detente" (Rist, 1977)--should continue to provide fresh insights into the questions to be asked about curriculum differentiation.

In addition to contradictions between the two paradigms, contradictions between studies within the interpretive paradigm have also emerged. A major confusion concerns the significance of the relationship between definitions of knowledge, their distribution, and students' sociocultural characteristics. Some studies cast the issue in terms of correspondence theory, suggesting that schools allocate high status knowledge to socially advantaged students who predominate in high-track classes and low-status knowledge to socially disadvantaged students who are over-represented in lower-track classes (Oakes, 1985). However, other studies indicate that the relationship between track placement, valued knowledge, and social class is not so straightforward or predictable. For example, lower-track classes in a homogeneous, middle-class, suburban school may be populated by middle rather than working-class students, yet students still receive a low-status curriculum (Page, 1987b). Definitions of high-status knowledge vary as well: the high-track curriculum is not necessarily high-status, at least as defined in the liberal tradition, but may be as technical, skills-based, and instrumental as the lower-track curriculum

described in other schools (Hanson, 1986).

Furthermore, students' reactions to school knowledge, whether high or low status, is unpredictable. Their definitions of important knowledge, grounded in cross-cutting factors of class (Willis, 1979), race (Ogbu, 1978), age (Everhardt, 1983), or gender (Davies, 1984), may not include the bookish, abstract school curriculum at all. At the same time, however, lower-track, working class students may have more abstract definitions of knowledge than teachers or high-track students, yet be prevented from demonstrating them (Keddie, 1971). Similarly, poor, minority lower-track children in some settings prefer or require a private, individualized, highly structured curriculum of worksheets (Furlong, 1977; Metz, 1978), but elsewhere see such a curriculum as alienating (Rosenbaum, 1976) or respond positively to a liberal curriculum (Heath & Branscombe, 1985). The effects of differentiated curricula on students' attitudes are also puzzling. Studies report that poor, minority lower-track students in Catholic schools see tracking as helpful and equitable (Valli, 1986), whereas similar students in public schools are stigmatized and suffer a loss of self-esteem (Oakes, 1985).

As interpretive studies of curriculum differentiation continue to be produced, the need grows to make sense of the contradictions. This points to the question: how do interpretive studies accumulate or generalize? Simply tallying interpretive studies, say on the basis of metaanalytic categories of whether they show tracking to be deleterious or salutary, reduces the findings in a way that violates the very basis for and value of interpretive research. On the other hand, to say that contradictions between studies simply reflect different contexts--"every case is different"--produces a kind of facile relativism and the continual re-invention of the wheel. A third and better tack suggests that interpretive studies generalize weakly, by analogy (Wehlage, 1981).[1] Because they provide both a detailed account and a

conceptual framework, the reader is able to find analogous cases to the one reported, either in the real world or in the research corpus. Contradictions between sites or studies (like "breakdowns" [Agar, 1986] in the field) then require the modification of theories about how teaching, learning, schools, and society are organized and related. In short, interpretive studies of curriculum differentiation do not accumulate in a consensus, but prompt the "refinement of the debate" (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). Their value is in providing data with which to strike new metaphors with which to conceptualize schooling (Kliebard, 1982), as Apple (1979) does in speaking of the politics of curriculum or Rosenbaum (1976), with tracking as a tournament. Thus, the often confounding specificities of interpretive studies are the necessary bedrock for better theory.

Erickson (1986, pp. 134-39) demonstrates how contradictions in the "thick" details of interpretive studies can be compared to identify the bases for analogy and more incisive understanding of the complex relationship between curricular and cultural differentiation. He begins with two studies of differentiated curricula (i.e., Au & Mason, 1981; Barnhardt, 1982) which support the notion that where teachers organize lessons that are congruent with students' home cultures, achievement is enhanced. However, subtle contradictions between the two prompt the speculation that academic gains are achieved because in culturally congruent lessons students can attend less to the social dimensions of studenting and are therefore freed to concentrate on academics. This modification of the theory of cultural and curricular congruence then allows Erickson to incorporate even more divergent data by suggesting that culturally <u>incongruent</u> curricula, like Distar (i.e., Stallings & Kaskowitz, 1974), may enhance the achievement of minority children because its ritualized format, which children quickly learn, provides a similar freeing of attention to academic tasks. Pushing the modification even further

with new data (i.e., Kleinfeld, 1979), Erickson notes that even with curricular and cultural clarity, the successful accomplishment of lessons also depends on teachers and students establishing consensus regarding their relationship and task. This shifts the metaphor for classroom interactions so that interactional interference appears not so much as a necessary outcome of cultural or curricular difference, but as a matter of politics and choice. Thus, Erickson concludes that while cultural differences may increase the risks for interactional dissonance in curricular matters, they do not require it.

In interpretive analyses, the microcontexts of classrooms are regarded as different in ways that are significant for teaching and learning, and macrocontexts--the community or society--are regarded as important sources of differences in student and teacher characteristics, but intermediate school contexts are often treated as equivalent settings and, therefore, are rather frequently overlooked as a source of contradictions. The failure to attend to the institutional context may be attributable to ethnographic myopia but may also reflect the persistent documentation in statistical studies of small, inconsistent effects made by formal or measurable differences between schools, such as class size, library size, or teacher qualifications. Accordingly, to consider the different effects of schooling one looked within a school, not between them (Jencks & Brown, 1975).

However, as Dell Hymes (1980) has evocatively suggested, we must begin to ask, what kinds of schools are there?[2] The question challenges the presumption that schools are equivalent types without distinctive features and calls to the fore an organizational context that might explain some of the many inconsistencies that plague educational studies. At the same time, the question challenges the usefulness of traditional classificatory schemes for schools that have not proven particularly helpful in mapping them or in

identifying the sources of their diversity: size, location, socioeconomic resources, or sector. Indeed, interpretive studies have made clear that formal labels such as "magnet school" or demographic facts such as "racially integrated" are not accurate predictors of a school's distinctiveness.

Instead, research must consider the informal characteristics of the school organization--its culture, climate, or meaning system--as a crucial source of diversity (Jelinek, Smircich, & Hirsch, 1983; Metz, 1986). Then one asks not only about a school's resources, but what a school makes of them (Barr & Dreeben, 1978), recognizing that the school culture provides a context within which specific practices of educational and social differentiation are rendered meaningful. Consequently, schools that are objectively, formally similar may be shown to have quite different identities. Two schools that take students' social characteristics into account in differentiating the curriculum may misconstrue them, so that a middle class student body perceived as working class may be provided a skills-based curriculum, while an objectively similar student body, differently defined within a different organizational culture, may be provided a liberal curriculum (Page, 1987b). Similarly, a curriculum of worksheets used to provide all students with a fair chance in one school (Metz, 1986) may be alienating in another institutional context (Rosenbaum & Presser, 1978). With the concept of institutional culture as an important structural feature of schools, we would not expect--as indeed the literature does not tell us--that curriculum differentiation is everywhere the same. Instead, its meaning arises in a complex interaction between differentiation within a school (by track) and differences between schools (by culture).

III. "CYCLES OF PREJUDICE"[3] A LOWER-TRACK LESSON IN AMERICAN HISTORY

I turn now to an example of the analysis the interpretive method and sociocultural theory sponsor. In particular, I focus on the effect of the

institutional context on the teacher's definition of the lower-track curriculum and on students' reactions to it.

Southmoor High School is the kind of public school that sustains and even promotes real estate values. It is a large (2,000), midwestern comprehensive, replete with the usual vocational, general, special, and college-preparatory courses of study.[4] However, the school thinks of itself and operates as a preeminently academic institution. Indeed, the academic emphasis is so pervasive that vocational courses at the school are sometimes criticized as "too bookish" or, faculty members, as "interested only in the students going to Harvard." Such occasional criticisms are muted by the wider perception of Southmoor's program as excellent, however. White, middle and upper-middle class parents concerned with their children's present and future educational success vie with each other to buy homes in the school's attendance area.

Faculty members characterize Southmoor as "heavenly," voicing a shared, tacit understanding of the school's student body and its mode of operation (Schlechty, 1976; Waller, 1932).[5] Teachers define regular-track students by eliding academic, behavioral, and sociocultural traits: they are "motivated and easy-to-teach, from upper middle-class, largely professional families." At the same time, teachers see themselves acting in the mode of knowledgeable, confident "professionals" who inspire serious but relaxed engagement with the facts, concepts, and methods of the arts and sciences. Unlike the tense relations reported between teachers and students at some academically-oriented schools (Lightfoot, 1981; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985), relations at Southmoor are cordial, often light-hearted, but also purposive, as both parties expect the other to contribute in sharp, meaningful ways to a classically academic curriculum offered in a "college campus atmosphere."

Southmoor's "heavenly" ethos is constituted in teachers' and students' perceptions and consequent enactments of their roles and relationships, at the

same time that it shapes their views and behavior. Many at the school excel. National Merit, Westinghouse, and Presidential awards crowd trophies for athletic and artistic competitions. State and national recognition for teachers' disciplinary and pedagogical expertise prompt loyal "followings" among students and their families. Teachers and students bask in the reflected glory of each other and of the school as a whole. Like parents, the media, and the general citizenry of the community of Maplehurst, they express a persistent pride in the school.

One might expect a public school like Southmoor, with talented teachers, an academically and socially advantaged student body, little "trouble," and considerable resources, to deal ably and equitably with its relatively small population of academically unsuccessful students. The school's provision of smaller, "adaptive" Additional Needs classes for about 70 students who fail in regular classes but are ineligible for special education suggests its responsiveness.[6] The expectation is further bolstered because the teachers and students in the classes are not so disadvantaged as those described in other studies of tracking (Finley, 1984; Metz, 1978; Oakes, 1985; Schwartz, 1981). Teachers are experienced, generally competent, and sometimes elect to teach a lower-track class. The great majority of lower-track students, like their regular-track peers at Southmoor, are white and middle class and, unlike many lower-track students elsewhere, score on average in the third rather than the fourth quartile on achievement tests. They express a strong commitment to school's importance.

However, despite these material, intellectual, and social resources, lower-track students and teachers occupy a strange netherworld of the academic hierarchy at Southmoor. They are part of the high school, yet marginal to it. As I shall discuss, the degree of marginality is such that "professional" teachers distance themselves from the lower-track role, students drop out at a

rate that approximates that of much more disadvantaged adolescents, and the chaos and conflict in Southmoor's Additional Needs classrooms resembles the "circus" reported in lower-track classrooms in imperiled institutions (Metz, 1978; Schwartz, 1981).

To describe the strange marginality of lower-track classes at Southmoor, I examine the role of the differentiated lower-track curriculum in reflecting and achieving it. I choose one American history lesson from a larger corpus of data (Page, 1984) for close analysis here: Mr. Robinson's ninth grade lesson about immigrants seeking their place in early twentieth-century America. While the lesson is unique in its content, characters, and interactions, it is also representative of other lessons in Mr. Robinson's lower-track class. Although it offers greater opportunities for legitimate discourse than is usual in lower-track lessons at Southmoor, its organizing principles also correspond to those of lessons designed independently by four other lower-track teachers at Southmoor. In addition, because Mr. Robinson is energetic, the students relatively advantaged, and the content of the lesson substantial, the usual explanations for "trouble," or conflict, in lower-track classes are less germane and the role of curricular negotiations, particularly visible.

The analysis of Mr. Robinson's lesson investigates the premise that adolescents--even lower-track adolescents--have a significant view of curricular knowledge and their relation to it. Thus, it posits the student's perspective, represented in the unofficial underlife of lessons, as a structural feature of classrooms. Rather than seeing knowledge as the self-evident and exclusive domain of the teacher and students' failures to respond with expected answers as mere "noise" or as the off-task behavior of the uninterested or unskilled, it considers the student underlife as an expression of an alternative, but antiphonal, perspective on knowledge.

The analysis goes beyond delineating the perspectives of teachers and

students regarding curricular knowledge, however, to describe their negotiation. In particular, it specifies how and when their differences become a source of "trouble" by examining the relationship between the official lesson and the underlife. Thus, the student's perspective on the curriculum is not treated as diametrically opposed or unrelated to school knowledge, which in turn is treated as an invariant phenomenon (Cusick, 1973; Everhardt, 1983; Gilmore, 1983; McDermott, 1974; Ogbu, 1978; Philips, 1983; Willis, 1977), but as intimately connected. Rather than attributing curricular conflict and classroom "trouble" to incapable, indifferent, or irrevocably estranged students or, alternatively, to an insensitive teacher or inescapable sociocultural conflict, it examines the "cultural stream" (Waller, 1932, p. 106) from which all in a school drink to specify the particular institutional contexts and processes within which it is sensible for the participants to choose to make different views of knowledge significant.

A. The Teacher's Perspective of the Lower-Track Curriculum

The teacher expects and is expected to define the curriculum. His/her definition reflects the idiosyncracies of an academic discipline and personal style, ideology, and interests. In addition, an individual's definition is socially constructed: it reflects the negotiation of informal, tacit, cultural norms that are shared throughout an institution and community about who teachers and students in a particular school are and the kind of knowledge with which they should engage. Therefore, Mr. Robinson's lesson about immigrants expresses his unique vision of lower-track history, but also the precepts of differentiation that are shared at Southmoor as a whole.

The curriculum can be variously conceived and studied: as a syllabus or lesson plans, the teacher's stated purposes or behavior, and, socioculturally, as emergent in teacher and student negotiations. In this interpretive study, I sift these "piled-up structures of meaning" (Geertz, 1973, p. 7) for their

organizing principles to clarify Mr. Robinson's and Southmoor's definition of the lower-track curriculum.

Ambiguous Expectations. Mr. Robinson's ninth grade, lower-track, American history lesson, considered in its formal outline, such as one might find in a lesson plan book or departmental syllabus, might be considered a model. Part of a larger unit on immigration, it utilizes two class periods, during the first of which students view a sophisticated film about southern and eastern European immigrants to the United States, "Storm of Strangers." The following day the class engages in lengthy recitations, first, to review details of the film, then to "figure out its central message." They also compose a paragraph summarizing the film in preparation for a future essay exam. In outline, therefore, the lesson attends to a significant, substantive topic in American history, emphasizes varied student activities, including some higher order thinking ("figuring out"), and instructs in verbal skills, including writing and discourse. According to measures often cited in studies of effective teaching (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971) and in contrast to lower-track lessons described in other studies (Oakes, 1985), Mr. Robinson's lesson appears neither trivial, routinized, nor alienating.

Formal interviews and informal conversations with Mr. Robinson deepen and shift the perspective gained from a perusal of the lesson's formal plan, suggesting the lesson's ambiguities, rather than clear-cut merits. On the one hand, Mr. Robinson proclaims certainty that academically unsuccessful students will succeed at Southmoor "only if they are provided an adaptive curriculum." As a Southmoor "professional" with virtually unlimited autonomy over the curriculum, his principal responsibility is the design of such a curriculum. On the other hand, Mr. Robinson proclaims equal certainty that lower-track students are radically--and negatively--different from regular students. Despite their considerable social and academic advantages, they are perceived

as the "dregs" of the academic hierarchy as well as the "twits" of the social order, and therefore "slow" both intellectually and developmentally. They not only cannot "go into the depth" that regular students achieve, but are "unpredictable and negative . . . they're hyper and never keep their mouths shut." Therefore, social and academic considerations conjoin to justify a history curriculum that is differentiated from regular history in its emphasis on control of students' behavior as well as of knowledge.[7]

Mr. Robinson's ambiguous view of lower-track students skews the rationale of the "adaptive curriculum." Hence, in some instances, Mr. Robinson emphasizes the lower-track curriculum's similarity to the regular curriculum. For example, its content "follows the same course outline as the other [regular] classes but differs in difficulty and total scope": both Mr. Robinson's regular and lower-track classes study units on the settling of the West, the Industrial Revolution, the Civil War, and immigration. Activities also are similar across tracks: students see many of the same films, participate regularly in whole-group recitations, and write essay as well as short answer exam questions. Moreover, Mr. Robinson explicitly contrasts the Southmoor "adaptation" with more conventional remedial approaches, which in his opinion offer students a "free-air-day" curriculum.[8] It eschews the "trivial content," mechanical worksheets, and "hunt-up-the-answer type" test questions that skills-based lessons emphasize. Instead, according to Mr. Robinson, not seatwork but "oral communication . . . motivates [lower-track] students and they are good at it." Not routinized drill and practice in the discrete skills of grammar or phonetics, but learning to write holistically in essays that ask one to "make connections" between pieces of information is proper instruction in writing. A political bonus accrues as well: as another lower-track teacher expressed it, because the content is "not so different from that in regular classes, students feel less set apart. They can sit at

the lunch table with their other [regular-track] friends in ninth grade and say they're studying [immigration] too."

In other instances, his disclaimers notwithstanding, Mr. Robinson comments on striking differences between the lower and regular-track curriculum. His comments suggest the lower-track curriculum's similarities to conventional remedial approaches in its highly circumscribed content and restricted forms of student engagement. The differentiation is apparent, for example, in the textbooks Mr. Robinson assigns classes "following the same course outline." Regular track students have two texts, a dense standard chronology and a book of case studies designed to encourage students "to develop their own points of view using skills of critical thinking and analysis." The texts necessitate daily homework assignments. They provide a base of information from which students seek additional library sources for writing a ten-page research paper. The case studies, especially, prompt elaborate, often exhilarating discussions. Mr. Robinson explains that, as an historian, he wants students to "make inferences from conflicting facts," to describe events of the past "in their own words," to "bring [the events of the past] to Southmoor today," and to "think critically but without simply being skeptical."

By contrast, lower-track students use a thin, "easy-to-read," large-print text that covers the Civil War in two pages of bland generalizations interspersed with a smattering of proper names and large blocks of pictures. Students are not allowed to take books from the classroom, as Mr. Robinson tells them, "because you might lose them." Consequently, reading the short chapters aloud, paragraph by paragraph in a style reminiscent of elementary school, and writing answers to the few multiple-choice questions at the end of chapters furnish in-class activities more often than recitations or exercises in "critical thinking." The "essay writing" much touted by Mr. Robinson consists of students composing a paragraph as a class, copying it from the

board where the teacher writes it, memorizing it, and repeating it verbatim on a test. At the same time, explicit instruction in vocabulary, spelling, or writing, is interjected only sporadically and in a highly joking manner. The teacher may interrupt the composition of a paragraph to comment on the spelling of words ("Pop! as in pop!ulation") or its development ("Now we have to have some specifics--not the Atlantic or the Pacific but some specifics--to back up the main idea"). For Mr. Robinson, the different text with its limited knowledge and ways of knowing provides a commonsensical "accommodation of students' poor reading skills." To ask "slow" students to read the dense chronology, go to the "depths," or adhere to the "pace" of regular classes would be "criminal." It would only lead to trouble-producing "frustration."

In short, the ambivalence with which Mr. Robinson faces lower-track classes is evident in the ambiguities of the lower-track curriculum. His "adaptation" amalgamates powerful norms for regular, "professional" teaching of "easy-to-teach" students "from upper-middle class, largely professional families" with similarly strong norms for special teaching of adolescents who are "your, you know, your basic bottom." As a result, the lower-track curriculum emerges not as a coherent plan, rationally and purposively based on the "individual educational needs" of lower-track students, although this is the way Mr. Robinson explains it. Nor is it patently lower-status knowledge provided to lower-class students as correspondence theory suggests (Bowles & Gintes, 1976; Oakes, 1985) . Instead, the lower-track curriculum is a radically thinned version, or skeleton, of the classical curriculum deemed appropriate for regular-track students. Mr. Robinson draws on the ethos of the institution to define the lower-track curriculum, not just on the particularities of tracking or the characteristics of lower-track students.

Although Mr. Robinson's lesson has distinctive features, its oscillating direction and amalgamation of conflicting norms express the organizing

principles of the lower-track curriculum at Southmoor. His uncertain direction and the amalgamation that expresses it is not a peculiarity of his personality. Lower-track lessons devised independently by four other, similarly ambivalent, lower-track teachers exemplify similar ambiguities. Moreover, the teachers operate in their regular classes with a single-minded aplomb that contrasts markedly with their confusing direction in lower-track classes. Thus, the ambivalence Mr. Robinson voices is not peculiar to him as an individual but is tacitly shared and understood by other lower-track teachers at Southmoor.

Resolving Ambivalence. How Mr. Robinson and other lower-track teachers at Southmoor resolve the ambivalence with which they regard lower-track teaching is visible if one looks beyond syllabi and intentions into classrooms. A principal focus on the teacher's enactment of the curriculum suggests the resolution is positive, since many of Mr. Robinson's questions, if coded according to various interactional schemes, are broad, authentic, or open-ended (Amidon & Hunter, 1966; Gamoran in the accompanying piece). For example, the main idea Mr. Robinson wanted students to carry away from the film and the lesson is that immigration represents "cycles of prejudice." Mr. Robinson informs students that, while they know the familiar melting pot story of immigration--what Mr. Robinson characterizes as the "rags to riches story"--this is not the story of immigration presented in the film. He asks the class to "think and figure out" the real story represented:

> The immigrants come over, they work hard, they accomplish. Kids, the next generation, they move out [of the ghetto]. But that still isn't the point of the story - - - that's the rags to riches, isn't it? You come here with NOTHING and after a couple of generations, you're rich. [Speaking softly, dramatically, leaning toward the class.] But - that's - not - what - the - story's - about. What is the story about? What do you think it is?

For the next ten minutes, almost all students engage in a fast-paced recitation initiated by Mr. Robinson's grammatically open-ended question:

"What do you think it is?" They work to "figure out" that not only was there prejudice rather than wealth awaiting immigrants, in contrast to usual myths about immigration, but that, in addition, ironically, the prejudice against immigrants came largely from earlier immigrants. Mr. Robinson summarizes this sophisticated main idea:

> Immigrants came over with nothing, but through hard work, education, and getting rich, the next generation of immigrants succeed in getting out of the ghetto and into part of the middle class. They become American Pie . . . [they] become part of the power structure . . . and now THEY have this hatred, this prejudice, toward - - - the new - - - immigrants that come in.

Mr. Robinson concludes this portion of the lesson, like a good teacher and historian, by pointing to the relevance of studying history and the validity of the idea of prejudice as a cycle: "And we still have these feelings [of prejudice] today . . about people coming from Asia, we had the Cubans [of 1980]." In sum, if looked at as meaningful in and of itself, much of Mr. Robinson's enactment suggests that he expects lower-track students, like his regular students, to "discover," rather than simply memorize, that prejudice is a "cycle."

However, if Mr. Robinson's lesson and questions are put in context, so that their significance is gauged not by pre-coded definitions but by students' responses and reactions--that is, if the curriculum is seen as a joint, on-going, social construction--the "discoveries" appear less authentic. For example, the main idea of the lesson prompts an explicit disagreement between the teacher and a student. The disagreement is not merely silly or mindless, but concerns the content and form of curricular knowledge. Dave offers a qualified objection to the teacher's determination that prejudice is a continuing "cycle":

> Mr. R: And, we still have these feelings [of prejudice] today . . . about people coming from Asia,

we had the Cubans.
Dave: Yeah, but with the Cubans, we had a right to feel that way-
Mr. R: [Well, okay, okay-
Dave: [-cause they were criminals.
Mr. R: We've got to be very careful, we've gotta be very careful in our actions. They were, they was certain, there were some criminals and so forth, but we also gotta keep into the idea of just other people coming in. Now listen, we're gonna put this together, okay? Gonna put it down in a paragraph that helps us understand what this film is and this paragraph will be on the test.

Here, a "slow," supposedly indifferent, lower-track student engages appropriately with the substance of the lesson. Dave responds with interest to the topic the teacher defines, rather than having no interest in historical abstractions about patterns of immigration. His contribution, although cut off, logically extends Mr. Robinson's topic regarding the persistence of prejudice. Dave also contributes additional data: the Cubans "were criminals." Using the data, he hypothesizes that prejudice may not be a simple "cycle," but a matter of particular reasons. In disagreeing with the teacher, Dave is not out of line but responds to Mr. Robinson's and Southmoor's norms supporting students' ability to "figure out" lessons. Moreover, Dave's objection is not hostile or "off-the-wall." It is voiced at an appropriate juncture in the discourse and is somewhat softened. Dave qualifies his rejection: "Yeah," says Dave, acknowledging Mr. Robinson's idea, "but."

Mr. R's response is notably less accommodating, however, and dismisses rather than welcomes Dave's idea. It illustrates the teacher's confused expectations, but more importantly, how he, like other Southmoor faculty, resolves the confusion. First, the teacher simply interrupts the student in mid-sentence. Dave has no chance to explain why "we had a right to feel" prejudiced against Cuban immigrants. Then, when Dave persists in explaining that the Cubans "were criminals," the teacher, after a number of false starts,

suggests that Dave's analysis is not "careful," that it misses or does not "keep into" the main point, and that it distracts attention from upcoming classroom activities. Finally, while Mr. Robinson admits there were "some criminals," he simply reiterates his position on prejudice in response to Dave's alternative hypothesis: "We also gotta keep into the idea of just other people coming in." The teacher then closes the disagreement and shifts the recitative activity to a group effort at paragraph-writing in which he exerts much greater control over acceptable answers. He ensures Dave's and other students' compliance with the shift by adding that "this paragraph will be on the test."

Confronted with disagreements, lower-track teachers at Southmoor, like Mr. Robinson, "read" students' behavior according to the institutional expectations formalized in tracking and tacitly shared throughout the faculty. Given that lower-track students are both "twits" and "dregs," "they just don't know how to carry on a reasonable argument . . . You can't get the depth and things just get out of hand so easily." Thus, from a teacher's perspective, students' objections to a lesson are out of order, representing neither valuable information or civil argumentation. Accordingly, teachers circumscribe the knowledge and ways of knowing available to students, using the curriculum to achieve greater control not only of the lesson's meaning but of students' behavior. A curriculum restricted to one way of viewing prejudice meets intellectually "slow" students' "individual educational needs" by not "frustrating" them with various, possibly competing, views. As importantly, it ensures good classroom order among developmentally "immature" students who "just don't know how to carry on a reasonable argument" by closing off the possibility of students' participation.

The restricted curriculum also manifests teachers' culturally sensible resolution of the Southmoor teacher's ambivalence regarding lower-track

students (See, also, Page, 1987a). Teachers distance themselves from the lower-track role and lower-track students, acting as uninvolved caretakers of the unruly with little "professional" concern for the intellectual development of "the basic bottom." Like other teachers at Southmoor, Mr. Robinson is not uncaring or an authoritarian personality type. Rather, he understands intuitively, as a member of Southmoor's culture, that the academic progress lower-track students can make is so insignificant for Southmoor's purposes as an academically preeminent institution that promoting it will receive few personal, professional, institutional, or civic rewards. As he put it, "Additional Needs classes are pretty low on the priority list at Southmoor." Control of troublesome students, on the other hand, contributes to the institution's ability to proceed in its main operation. Another lower-track teacher captured the imbalance:

> I try to be selective in what I teach. I mean, I'm not going into the past perfect tense with these kids. But, you know, nobody asks me what I'm doing in class. I mean, I put worksheets in the principals' or counselors' mailboxes, but they never ask me about it. As long as I take care of the classes, that's about it.

B. Negotiations of the Lower-Track Curriculum

Disagreements like the Cuban interchange furnish a unit of analysis with which to compare conflict and control across lessons and levels.[9] They can be counted, their processes examined, and their patterns detailed as a means to understanding curriculum differentiation. In disagreements, students and teachers publicly negotiate conflict over the content of the curriculum and over teachers' and students' relationship to it (in Mr. Robinson's lesson: Is prejudice a cycle? Who has the right to comment on prejudice?). Because interpretive studies as well as lower-track teachers and students cite conflict as a distinguishing dimension of lower-track classrooms, disagreements are an important theoretical and practical unit of analysis. In

addition, because teachers, like other Americans, regard disagreements ambivalently (Battistoni, 1985; Merelman, 1984)--as the epitome of democratic and intellectual exercises but also as a threat to efficient, equitable, and orderly coverage of material--their occurrence and management illustrate the balances teachers establish between goals for learning and order in different classes.

Frequency of Disagreements. One can measure the frequency of disagreements. At Southmoor, disagreements occur much more often in regular than in lower-track lessons. The significance of the measurement, however, is not self-evident, that is, lower-track classes are not sites of more harmony than regular classes. Rather, classroom observations document that disagreements occur less often in lower than in regular-track classes because public discourse of any kind is simply less frequent. In other words, lower-track teachers, including Mr. Robinson, respond to and make visible the expectations for behavioral as well as academic "trouble" that are formalized in tracking by "adapting" the lower-track curriculum to emphasize individual seatwork, films, silent reading, and social activities. They thereby achieve the absence of disagreements.

Management of Disagreements. Even more important, simply tallying disagreements ignores highly significant differences in their management in regular and lower-track classes. In regular-track classes, Southmoor teachers promote disagreements. As Mr. Robinson expressed it, regular students are "expected to develop critical thinking skills." Therefore, teachers present students with complex historical questions that fairly drip with controversy. Teachers share the floor with students, providing opportunities for lengthy student "editorials" and encouraging students, because of "experiences provided by their families," to contribute additional information to class discussions. Most importantly, teachers allow students not only to see

knowledge as controversial, but to resolve among themselves the discrepancies that arise, using rules of civility, argumentation, and debate. As a result, disagreements in regular track classrooms are not only frequent, but electric. Lessons generate excitement as to the issues and answers students and teachers will introduce.

In contrast, disagreements in lower-track lessons are not only infrequent, but when they do occur, produce a tension that is more electrocutionary than electric. The ambiguous lower-track curriculum presents students with a deadening Catch-22. On some occasions, teachers solicit students' public, critical engagement with the lesson: they ask interesting questions that implicitly and explicitly invite differences of opinion. However, they respond to students' engagement by discounting it, quickly and arbitrarily closing down counter-assertions, and reasserting their central control over classroom talk and knowledge. Thus, lower-track lessons elicit students' active engagement with knowledge, yet treat active, competent engagement, like Dave's, as <u>insubordinate</u>. Teachers provide not only for a <u>subordinate</u> role for lower-track students through an emphasis on the noncontroversial bits and pieces of worksheet items coupled with the passive task of circling the one right answer. More crucially, they treat students' active engagement with knowledge as <u>insubordinate.</u> Fundamentally, in the skeletonized lower-track curriculum students at Southmoor are faced with a situation in which they cannot demonstrate intellectual interest or ability.

<u>Patterns of Negotiations.</u> Disagreements are ephemeral if distinctive moments in lower-track lessons. Students did not recall the Cuban interchange as a turning point in their assessments of ninth grade history and, in the lesson, turned rather quiescently to the paragraph writing proposed by Mr. Robinson. However, disagreements in a lesson develop histories and a significance that their individual occurrences belie. Apparently settled by

the teacher, they nevertheless recur, but with increasing hostility. Thus, they accumulate exponentially, so to speak, rather than additively, so that in the very short period of a class period, a process of schismogenesis (Bateson, 1972, cited by Erickson, 1984), or differentiation between teacher and students, occurs and is expressed in conflict over the curriculum.

The pattern of disagreements in Southmoor's lower-track classes is such that lessons with much to recommend them degenerate in less than an hour into "circuses." Mr. Robinson and other lower-track teachers explain such "trouble" as inevitable with lower-track students: "They're like naughty fourth graders . . . they're distracted, there are call outs. They're up walking around the room when they shouldn't be . . . You can't count on them. Any one thing can set them off." However, the "circus" that teachers blame on "slow" students' intellectual and behavioral deficiencies, if captured in ethnography, is a social achievement.

The degree to which curricular knowledge functions as a key means of classroom conflict is reflected by returning to Mr. Robinson's lesson to compare a disagreement that occurs in the last third of it with the earlier Cuban disagreement. In both, Mr. Robinson and Dave are the principals, although other students join Dave in the second disagreement. The topic of disagreement also recurs: prejudice as an automatic occurrence. In addition, between the two disagreements, tension in the lesson increased as students engaged in a highly-controlled, often punishing, summarizing activity in which they guessed[10] not simply the ideas, but the very words, that the teacher had in mind for a jointly-composed paragraph about immigration.

Even though students voiced frustration during the writing activity, at its conclusion Dave asks a politely phrased question of substance. He is still "confused" about how the "cycles of prejudice" operate. Are they such that new immigrant groups are continually added to a burgeoning population who are

prejudiced against, or does prejudice against a new group deflect prejudice from earlier immigrant groups? In Dave's words, "Are they [the Americans] still prejudiced . . . against the Irish?"

Dave: Wait. I'm, I'm confused now. Okay, if the Americans, they were prejudiced against the Irish, right? And also, the Irish became the new middle class. Are they still prejudiced of them?
[5.0]
Tim: I don't see where the Irish took off. The Eng-, er, Americans are prejudiced of the Jews now.
[3.0] [giggle]
T: Let's just finish this [paragraph] off and then we'll answer your kee-wes-chuns (questions).
Ss: [undecipherable]
T: [reading from the board where he has written the paragraph the class has composed as a group] "And now the new middle class treated them with hate and prejudice, just like they had been treated." Now, we already arrived at that, we have this whole thing settled.
Dave: Now answer my question.
T: Yes:::. Be sure you get it down. "And now the new middle class treated them with hate and prejudice - - just as they had been treated." Okay?
Dave: You gonna answer my question?
T: Now, do I have to, shall we finish that "just as they had been treated" or can you - - Does this make sense to you?
Ss: [chatter]
T: "The other immigrants came over - - -
Ss: [chatter]
T: "And now the new middle class treated them with hate and prejudice." Okay?
Ss: [chatter]
John: Is this paragraph done now?
T: Yes.
John: Good.

Mr. Robinson's responses to Dave's and Tim's opening questions are notably more grudging than in the Cuban interchange. Twice he offers only long silences (5, 8). He follows with mockery, demeaning students' questions as "key-wes-chuns" (10). Then, suggesting that the paragraph on which the class has been working may not be quite complete (9), he stalls, reading aloud its last sentence, or parts of it, four times (12-14, 17-19, 21-22, 27-28). Further, he intersperses comments that judge the issue of the "cycles of prejudice" uncontroversial. For example, he asserts that "we have this whole

thing settled" (14-15), and he appeals to the class to say that the paragraph "makes sense to [them]" (22-23), if not to the questioners, Dave and Tim.

Students react to the teacher's maneuvers with considerably less patience and acquiescence than in the Cuban interchange. They persistently, jointly, demand that their questions be taken seriously. Thus, in this recurrent disagreement, Dave is joined by Tim in "confusion" about the lesson's main idea. Other students join the two boys, so that following Mr. Robinson's stalling, the noise level rises as side conversations and under-the-breath comments multiply (24, 26, 29). In contrast to their earlier cooperativeness with the teacher, students withhold agreement with the teacher's suggestion that the paragraph "makes sense" or "is settled." Civility declines further as Dave, taunting brattishly, openly demands that his "key-wes-chun" be answered (16, 20). Finally, a student--not the teacher--determines that the paragraph is indeed "done" (30) and sarcastically, negatively, evaluates its completion (32). Throughout, students orient increasingly to peers, challenge with growing unruliness, and refuse to go on with the lesson. However, their snide behavior is not that of inherently hostile, ignorant, or uninterested lower-track students. Instead, acting like lower-track students reciprocates and negatively assesses Mr. Robinson's refusal to "go back to the couple of questions" (33) and, therefore, to teach.

The struggle between students and teacher over curricular knowledge escalates further when Mr. Robinson yields the floor (33-34) and turns to the students' questions:

33 T: Okay. Now, let's go back to the couple of questions. What
34 was it that you said?
35 Dave: Why, awright, the 'mericans were
36 prejudiced
37 T: [No. It's not, it's [not
38 Dave: [Naw, naw, naw,
39 T: Well, no, but now lookit, but now lookit. You're
40 starting off with the Americans. What are the

41 Americans?
42 Dave: Awright, awright, awright. But
43 we, they,
44 T: But wait, wait,
45 Dave: They
46 T: WAIT! Who - - were - - the - -
47 Americans?
48 Dave: Wait, uh -
49 John: The Indians.
50 T: The Indians were the Americans.
51 Dave: Awright. but just listen to me.
52 T: Okay.
53 Dave: We came over, right? Let's say, Scandinavians,
54 Germans,
55 T: That was after.
56 Dave: Awright, the Irish came, right?
57 T: In the 1840's, '50's, '60's.
58 Dave: Well, who was prejudiced against them?
59 T: The people that were already here.
60 Tim: Awright. Now, all of a sudden, the people that were
61 already here, that were prejudiced against them, the
62 Irish - Are they still prejudiced against the Irish?

Although postponed questions are often forgotten, Dave remembers his when the teacher asks him to repeat it (33-36). However, before Dave can fully reiterate the query about what happens to prejudice against the Irish, Mr. Robinson abruptly interrupts him (37). The two exchange interruptions (38, 44, 45, 46) and increasingly heated imprecations to "wait" (44, 46, 48). Getting the last word, Mr. Robinson implies that Dave is indeed "confused," but not about the analysis of prejudice. He simply does not know the meaning of a word familiar even to elementary school children: "Americans." (47).

However, although a commonsensical term, "Americans" is used technically in the lesson.[11] Knowing what it means is fundamental to understanding who the non-American immigrants are and, therefore, how prejudice works. Yet Mr. Robinson does not provide a precise definition, even though students' confusion echoes an earlier, explicit question: "But who are the Americans?" Instead, his definition here--"The Indians"--obscures rather than clarifies Dave's and other students' confusion about how prejudice develops or persists in conjunction with the process of becoming "American." Students mark its

inadequacy, asserting that "The Indians were not prejudiced against the first white men."

Thus, students seem to recognize that reactions to immigrants involve more than "the idea of just other people coming in." Mr. Robinson, however, does not acknowledge their questions by clarifying the social and economic contexts within which prejudice arises. It remains disembodied, mechanical "cycles." As students continue to press him with questions and thereby to use both experiential and school knowledge about prejudice to counter rather than acquiesce in his definition of knowledge and of control, he offers only that "prejudice against the Irish disappeared . . . and now, they're fully accepted." He points to John Kennedy's election to the presidency as evidence. Students offer counter examples: they do not accept the Kennedy family; prejudice against Jews and blacks has not disappeared, even though subsequent immigrant groups have arrived. However, all such evidence is dismissed. In the end, Mr. Robinson closes the conflict regarding the "cycle of prejudice" with a heated fiat. When John asks again why earlier immigrants who became Americans treated later immigrants badly, Mr. Robinson states flatly and irrevocably, relying on power, not rational argumentation, clear definitions, or exposition of opinions: "I've already EXPLAINED that."

Not all lower-track teachers dismiss disagreements so summarily as Mr. Robinson in this lesson. Others may offer technical information, a "vote," or a buffer to points of conflict as a means of exiting disagreements.[12] Furthermore, not all conflicts in lower-track lessons are curricular, since lower-track students can be as "antsy" as regular adolescents. Moreover, teachers in all classrooms sometimes close disagreements peremptorily, insisting on their perspective or moving on with a lesson's activities. Such insistence reflects and re-creates their prerogatives as teacher and the unequal social relations of the classroom. Indeed, disagreements are unusual

events in all classrooms precisely because they trigger teachers' intuition that the usual order of the classroom is upset when students assume an evaluative role.[13]

Nevertheless, despite individual variations, disagreements in Southmoor's lower-track classrooms adhere to the pattern evidenced in Mr. Robinson's lesson and are thereby differentiated from regular-track lessons. The pattern is one of escalating conflict as students resist the teacher's attempt to control their behavior by controlling knowledge. Hence, lower-track lessons may begin with relatively unstructured, inviting activities but, in response to students' involvement, shift to increasingly structured activities. However, the more teachers use curricular knowledge to control, the more Southmoor students counter it. At first individually and then in pairs and small groups, students offer evidence and argumentation for a different perspective on knowledge. Only as their "effort" is rejected and, indeed, treated as <u>insubordinate</u>, do students shift strategies to match the teacher's show of power by exerting their own. They turn away from school knowledge, civil discourse, and the teacher to the antics of the peer group: they chat, wander the room, joke, scoot noisily in their desks, talk out, share gum, and pack up their bookbags. Previously effective invitations to "figure out" an issue or "warnings" that "one page on the test will deal with this" fail to re-capture attention. By the end of lower-track lessons, the student-defined, unofficial underlife overwhelms the teacher's official lesson, functioning as an intimate but negative evaluation of it.

The predominance of a "circus" over the lesson, however, is not an inevitable outcome of Southmoor students' lack of skills or their irrevocable disdain for school knowledge. Nor is it the straightforward outcome of the teacher's provision of a patently trivial curriculum. Mr. Robinson's lesson "hooked" Dave and the others and they worked hard to understand it. However,

they found that engagement would be treated as insubordinate and, moreover, would be followed by activities that restricted their involvement even more. Therefore, students turned away from a lesson that was not only unclear in its requirements but whose very lack of clarity made visible the teacher's omnipotence and students' lack of voice.

Ironically, to have a voice, students must exhibit the very puerile, clamorous, social orientation that the institution expects and for which it provides a differentiated, skeletal, lower-track curriculum. They therefore validate Mr. Robinson's--and Southmoor's--view of them as so far beneath the "easy-to-teach" students that they are unteachable. This construction is accomplished in a complex interaction of the manifest curriculum of immigrants finding their places in twentieth century America, the hidden curriculum of lower-track students finding their places in twentieth century Southmoor, and the students' reaction to both, expressed in a jointly-constructed, evaluative underlife.

C. The Student's Perspective

One might wonder why lower-track students in Mr. Robinson's history class and in other Additional Needs classes at Southmoor respond so vociferously. Why don't they just lie low, protectively withholding disagreements with the teacher's lesson as regular track adolescents often do (McNeil, 1986)? Why aren't they aggressively, stonily, silent as middle class Additional Needs students at an objectively comparable but culturally different high school in Maplehurst are (Page, 1984)? Or, are lessons merely an amusing game of "get the teacher," as some Southmoor teachers assert and studies of other schools suggest (Cusick, 1983)? In short, how do lower-track students understand the lower-track curriculum?

Loosely structured interviews provide a view of students different from the shared institutional characterization of them as the "dregs" and "circus"

of the academic hierarchy. Instead, they suggest academically unsuccessful students' intense ambivalence regarding school (Metz, 1983) and, hence, their crucial vulnerability to the lower-track curriculum and the student role it implies for them.

Students' ambivalence derives from the recognition that schooling is an important social institution, but one in which their achievement is marginal. It is marked in interviews by recurring metaphors of unsettledness and imbalance. Repeatedly, students assert a need to "get my act together," "get set in my life," or "get completely scheduled." Whereas casual conversations with academically successful adolescents invariably converge on the topic of what one wants to be when one grows up, academically unsuccessful adolescents call attention to the precarious nature of their present situation. In addition to implying failure, the need to "get [one's] act together" conveys students' sense of responsibility and good intentions, or at least, their understanding that they should "act" as though they have such intentions (Leacock, 1969; Varenne, 1982). Finally, "getting [one's] act together suggests that one should control one's situation. Even if students are not academically talented, as lower-track placement at Southmoor indicates, they nevertheless believe that if they make an active effort to "get it together"--if they "try"--the school situation can be successfully "set."

Lower-track students are particularly anxious about "getting set" in school (even though they may not plan to follow a life of the mind) because one's place in school marks progress in moving through the cultural stages of life, from younger to older--and better--levels. Students recognize the school's powerful role in symbolizing passage through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. As one put it, "School pulls you up into life." Therefore, students are sensitive to the school's embodiments of the prerogatives of age. In the important cultural task of "growing up," freshmen positively disdain

middle school and long to be sophomores, who are excused from study halls and "have their freedom." By contrast, students who misbehave are callow "babies; you'd have to stoop to be at their level." Criticisms of lessons as "babyish--we did that in elementary school" are as common as the refrain, "bor::ing."

Unfortunately, progress through the stages of growing up and school is not an automatic function of aging. School "gets tougher as you go along." In a fundamental sense at Southmoor, being "held back" in school is as emotionally wrenching as being "held back" in life:

> I stayed back in seventh grade because of the school and I guess it is 86% of the people just stay back and they, like, keep a kid back a year to let them, see how they progress and everything and give them a lot better experience . . . But I didn't like the idea of being held back and I swore, I PROMISED myself, that when I got outta that school, I'd just go up, like I did when I came here this year.

The general ambivalence that characterizes the adolescent stage of life in the United States (Sizer, 1985) is therefore magnified by placement in lower-track classes at Southmoor. One reason for this is that the lower-track curriculum provides for success in school if one acts subordinately, like a child, dutifully completing an array of worksheets or acquiescing in the teacher's version of the one right answer. However, acting like a child violates norms of adolescence and "growing up." Moreover, "getting [one's] act together" is salient precisely because one's school position in the lower-track is precarious. Yet the lower-track curriculum makes it difficult, if not impossible, to "get set" because there is little room in it for recognition of the considerable skills, information, or values students bring to class with them. Instead, active engagement with knowledge is deemed insubordinate.

Even though Southmoor provides a marginal place for them, lower-track

students express many pro-school sentiments. Their positive dispositions reflect their social status and parents' absolute demands for school success. They also reflect students' participation in the self-assured culture of Southmoor. Lower-track students say there is no high school in Maplehurst better than Southmoor. They comment repeatedly on the diploma's importance for the jobs to which they aspire (such as nurse, owner-manager of a grocery, computer repairman, teacher, secretary, artist, professional athlete with a major in physical education) and seem to recognize the particular prestige conferred by a Southmoor diploma. Even when lower-track students admit that they are "sometimes tired of school," they add, "but I still try." All scoff at transferring, many aspire to college, and none mentions dropping out (although many will).

Additional Needs students' relatively positive attitude toward school is most notable in their respect for Southmoor teachers. In contrast to lower-track students at an objectively comparable but culturally different second high school in Maplehurst who adamantly maintain they cannot name a good teacher because they "have never had one," Southmoor students mediate a school culture in which teachers are highly valued members of the organization and easily identify favorites who are "good." Although all can talk about teachers they do not like or esteem, they more often describe teachers who "help and explain when I don't get it." Overall, lower-track students at Southmoor express a generalized expectation that teachers, as knowledgeable adults, are on their side and will be helpful to them as they make their way through school and the stages of youth. Thus, teachers are not the faceless "enemy," as at the second high school, but are seen as persons.

Teachers are seen not only as personable, but as powerful. Unlike the disdain with which students at the second high school treat teachers whom they regard as irrelevant, faceless hindrances, Southmoor teachers are treated with

considerable deference. The deference has a personal basis. For example, a student protested that she could never tell her history teacher that his class was "boring" because "it would be rude. I mean, imagine how he would feel!" Deference is also a response to teachers' knowledgeableness and continues even when students can articulate a reasoned objection to the way a class is taught: "I may disagree [with the lack of any historical content in a class that is formally titled, history], but I'm sure the teacher knows what he is doing, even if I don't." Indeed, only "troublemakers," from whom all Additional Needs students distinguished themselves, openly criticize a teacher or lesson. They are "immature, but they think they're so big . . . they hassle teachers."

A boy's explanation of his placement in an Additional Needs history class captures particularly well the combination of personableness, authority, and power that Southmoor teachers represent for students. In the student's words, the Southmoor teacher is "honest," cares about what is "good for" the student, and is also willing to "give [him] a break." They strike a bargain, with rewards for both: the teacher gets the student to leave his faster-paced regular class; the student gets a higher grade for making the choice voluntarily.

> I like a teacher who's honest with me, you know, saying, "You're having a problem here." You know, "Here's a way to solve it." Like my [regular] history teacher told me, "Why don't you talk to the counselor and I'll tell her that you want an appointment with her and tell her that you'd like to--you know--know something about this Additional Needs history class, because I think it would do a lot of good for you, and I know the counselor would." He goes, you know, "Actually, your writing is terrible." And I go, "I know" [laughs self-consciously]. And, uh, he gave me a break, you know. I told him, "I've never had any previous essay writing before. We did it in eighth grade and I wasn't there for that." And, um, he gave me a break. I should've gotten like a D and he gave me a C, and so, you know, that's extra credit for trying hard, you know.

Overall, lower-track students at Southmoor evince a fundamental desire to survive high school. If they are hardly angels, "easy-to-teach," or

intellectually gifted, they nevertheless voice little of the resistance to school of Willis' (1977) lads, the high tragedy of Willie (Cottle & Klineberg, 1974), or the studied ennui of Cusick's (1973) jocks. However, the role for "the basic bottom" of the academic hierarchy at Southmoor is principally a passive imbibing of discrete, non-controversial bits of academic information. The role plays on students' ambivalence by presenting them with a Catch-22. If students enact a subordinate role, as required by worksheets and acquiescence in the teacher's definition of the curriculum, they are not taking control of their "act" and "growing up," as norms of adolescence, family, and the school itself, with its emphasis on remediating failure, indicate is necessary. Yet when students participate actively in lessons, their "effort" is treated as out-of-order. Ironically, the endeavor to keep topics on the floor or to raise substantive questions requires students to act like the very "troublemakers" they disdain for "fighting the teacher."

In part, students' behavior is a response to unclear lessons that call forth contradictory behaviors. However, in addition, the lack of clarity in lessons conveys the marginality of lower-track students' place at Southmoor. Students' reactions in classrooms mark the injustice with which the institution treats them.

IV. CONCLUSION

This interpretive study explores the marginal netherworld of a "heavenly" public high school to suggest the complex "strata of meaning" in which differentiation in schools, like differentiation in American society, occurs. In particular, it documents an interactive, multifacted, and often perverse process--rather than a linear, unidimensional, and predictable one--in which the beatific culture of a school penetrates classrooms to shape and differentiate curricular negotiations as it is itself re-created in those negotiations.

Unlike a survey, which might score Southmoor teachers' contradictory expectations as neutral because it averages them, or as positive or negative, depending on the response elicited on the day of the survey, this interpretive study details teachers' deep ambivalence regarding their place in an institution that values academic success yet proclaims lower-track students' failure to achieve. Moreover, it delineates the intricacy of teachers' expectations as they function to resolve an institutionally-derived ambivalence, permitting teachers to distance themselves from a caretaker's role that contradicts their "professional," regular-track status as designers of intellectual programs. Thus, while a survey might document a seemingly straightforward correlation between teachers' expectations and tracks, it would mislead by suggesting that lower-track teachers have only low expectations. Inservices based on the correlational data and designed to raise teachers' expectations would make little sense to practitioners who perceive themselves as offering lower-track students high goals in an "adapted" yet academic curriculum. Similarly, moves to abolish tracking would be simplistic, because the remedy fails to take into account the institutional and cultural underpinnings of teachers' expectations. Indeed, such corrective policies, based on incomplete, undetailed information, would doubly miscarry by overlooking the opportunity to build on the positive aspects of Southmoor "professionals'" attitudes.

This interpretive account of Mr. Robinson's lesson also provides a new look at the "circus" that is consistently documented as characteristic of lower-track classrooms and commonsensically understood, given unidirectional definitions of curriculum, as their necessary feature. It reconceptualizes curriculum and clarifies its crucial importance, even--or especially--in classes for the "slow." As the sifting of Mr. Robinson's lesson describes, the curriculum is not simply the topics and activities transmitted by a

teacher, inherently meaningful and therefore readily coded by observers using pre-determined categories. Instead, it is a sociocultural construction whose meaning, centered on questions of knowledge, power, and the prerogatives of age, is emergent in on-going negotiations between teachers and students. As the study documents, the responses of lower-track students are crucial determinants of the curriculum. As ambivalent as teachers, students strive to demonstrate the "effort" that survival at Southmoor and "growing up" seem to require, yet must resort to the extremes of "immaturity" and "troublemaking" that they deplore simply to make their "efforts" known. The cultural cross-purposes at which they and teachers work--teachers seeking distance, students, engagement--crystallize in the language of the classroom: disagreements explode as knowledge and ways of knowing are used as a major resource in conflict. Thus, the "circus" is not a "cycle of prejudice" caused by tracking, students' intellectual and behavioral deficiencies, teachers' insensitivity, or inevitable sociocultural conflict. It is a production in which teachers, using the curriculum to control, are resisted by students who challenge that control, eventually to the point of disdaining the knowledge altogether.

Finally, this interpretive study demonstrates that as important as the question of whether students and teachers come to school with different views of important knowledge is the question of why and how the differences are made important within the school. Thus, it does not focus on universal causal relations between track, curriculum, and the demographic characteristics of classroom participants. Rather it asks how teachers and students create a condition in which it makes sense for "professional" teachers and reasonably skilled and committed students in an academic institution to engage in "circuses." It describes an institutionally-generated pattern of disagreements in which a process of differentiation begins, builds, and rends social

relations within a class period. Such short-term differentiation, in which students learn that they have few legitimate means of expressing academic competence or interest, if continued over a semester or an educational career, may explain not only the "circus" of every day lessons, but a drop out rate from Southmoor's Additional Needs classes that is astoundingly similar to that in highly disadvantaged urban schools. Indeed, the inconsistent, limited interactions of lower-track lessons may suggest that the chief contribution academically unsuccessful students can make is to stay out of the way of the school's main operation of academic preeminence in the netherworld of the lower-tracks and the underlife of lessons. Many Additional Needs students take the "break," acquiescing in order to graduate. An equally large number drop out. Both enactments confirm the marginality of the academically unsuccessful in "heaven."

NOTES

1. Wehlage's (1981) article is a particularly insightful discussion of the generalizability of interpretive studies.

2. The question may not generate a taxonomy of schools, but will provoke new insights regarding schools.

3. Quotation marks denote statements by staff members and students in the Maplehurst School District. I also indicate some characteristics of talk, using these symbols: overlapping utterances by long [brackets]; short, untimed pauses by -, slightly longer pauses by ---, and timed pauses by (seconds); emphasis by underlining and greater emphasis by CAPS; omissions of parts of quotations by . . . ; and descriptors regarding the situation in regular brackets. All names are pseudonyms.

4. Powell, et al. (1985) differ from past descriptions of the American high school by adding the special curriculum to the usual trilogy of general, vocational, and college preparatory. They thereby note the increased differentiation in high schools since the launching of Sputnik.

5. Stipulating two elements of school culture calls attention to the school's division into sub-groups based on age: youth/students and adults/teachers. The definitions similar to Metz's (1986) more elaborate model, in which elements are further distinguished, for example, by distinguishing between faculty culture and the principal's role. It differs from Ianni, et al.'s (1975, p. 113) study, in which age-based sub-cultures were found to be "an appealing but inaccurate view of the social structure of high school."

6. Faculty members at Southmoor estimated that there was a need for at least twice as many Additional Needs slots, however.

7. Cohen, in Powell, et al. (1986, Chapter 5), describes the development of American secondary education as similarly ambivalent: American educators had little faith in the common man's intellectual ability but tremendous faith in the curriculum's ability to excite academic endeavors.

8. Mr. Robinson's disparagement of the conventional remedial approach also indirectly criticizes the curriculum at an objectively comparable but culturally different secondary school in Maplehurst: Marshall High School. At Marshall, the mode of organization is bureaucratic, rather than "professional," and the faculty characterizes its typical students as "your typical blue-collar kid," not as "from upper-middle class, professional families." Hence, the school provides a disciplined, instrumental, skills-based curriculum, one deemed appropriate for "blue-collar kids." In Additional Needs classes, the curriculum is skewed so that learning is not just disciplined, as in regular classes, but regimented. An extended comparison of the two schools is available in Page (1987b).

9. Disagreements are recognizable units of discourse in which an assertion by one person prompts a counter-assertion by another. Following negotiation, the disagreement is exited, but only sometimes as a result of a resolution of the disagreement.

10. For a discussion of guessing as the way of knowing taught to lower-track students at Southmoor, see Page, 1986.

11. For an interesting discussion of the language of history, including its confusion of technical and everyday terms and the problems this poses in classrooms, see Edwards (1978).

12. See Page (1984) for a description of the way teachers resolve disagreements.

13. Teachers' intuitive, negative reactions to disagreements may be triggered by a conflict in discourse forms. In usual classroom discourse, teachers ask questions, students provide answers, and teachers evaluate the answers (Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966; Mehan, 1978). The form of the discourse reflects and re-creates the unequal social relations in classrooms. However, in disagreements, students occupy the third, evaluative position in talk and thereby take on the prerogatives of the teacher. In Page (1984), I suggest that teachers and lower-track students may construct extended disagreements because they operate out of contradictory discourse forms.

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